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Soviet Invasion Aided by U.S Technology

In his righteous indignation at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter has understandably chosen to ignore the valuable help given to the Soviet invasion by the United States: many of the Soviet soldiers now occupying Afghanistan rode across the border in trucks that were built with American technology, supplied in the name of detente.

Though initial responsibility for the American technical aid, and the outrageously lax safeguards under which it was provided, can be laid at the door of Richard M. Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger, the Carter administration cannot escape a good share of the blame. When a middle-echelon Commerce Department official blew the whistle last year on the Soviets' misuse of U.S. technology, his warnings were disregarded by his superiors and he was denounced as a troublemaker.

The president tacitly admitted that U.S. technical aid is important to the Soviets when he announced that shipments of sophisticated industrial equipment would be suspended as a result of the aggression in Afghanistan. He declined, however, to go into specifics, which would have made clear how he and his predecessors were duped by the Soviets in a single-minded U.S. pursuit of détente.

From confidential documents and knowledgeable sources who talked to my reporters Dale Van Atta and Mark Zusman, I can now provide details of the way Carter's policymakers were led down the primrose path by the Kremlin's palace elite.

Back in the early 1970s when Kissinger was seeking glory as the architect of détente, the export of advanced industrial machinery, including IBM computers, for the Soviets' gigantic Kama River truck factory was approved at the highest levels. At the time, some officials, including then-Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, voiced concern that the Russians might use the central Asian truck plant, the biggest in the world, to produce military equipment.

Kissinger brushed the misgivings aside. A confidential Commerce Department memorandum states that in 1971 Kissinger "ordered the secretary of commerce to grant three pending applications" for construction of the Soviet plant. Another secret memo set the final value of U.S.-licensed equipment and technology at $1.5 billion. A major U.S. news magazine described the Kama River plant as "a living symbol of how détente can work."

Others, notably our Western European allies, were not so sure. On March 20, 1975, Kissinger cabled U.S. officials in Paris on the best way to allay such doubts. "Kama trucks are not tactical military vehicles with cross-country capability," the secret cable said. "Some may ultimately be outfitted with front-wheel drive for muddy or icy environments. However, trucks will not be equipped for deepforwarding or have other features typical of military models."

Kissinger's cable concluded that "we see little likelihood of diversion" to military uses. The American officials were instructed to belittle any odious comparison between the Kama plant and a Czechoslovakian truck plant that produced military vehicles, and for which a U.S. license was rejected in 1970.

Despite Kissinger's uncharacteristic confidence in the Soviets' good faith, Commerce Department officials were alerted by intelligence officials last year to the fact that the Soviets were producing 100,000 more engines than trucks at Kama River, and were warned that the engines "undoubtedly were to be used in military trucks."

When this serious breach of the intent of the U.S. licensing program was pointed out by a Commerce Department analyst, Larry Brady, his boss, Stanley Marcuss, and then-Secretary Juanita M. Kreps gave Congress an astonishing explanation: Technically, the Soviets hadn't violated the licensing agreement, because they had never signed the standard promise that the U.S.-supplied technology would not be used for military purposes. That part of the license application had mysteriously been left blank.

For calling attention to the serious weaknesses in the technological export program, Brady was demoted, ostracized and threatened with firing. Brady's superiors have also circulated secret internal memos intended to discredit his whistleblowing.

Because Nixon and Carter officials naively discounted the possibility of Soviet skulduggery, the Soviets were able to invade Afghanistan in American-engineered trucks. Détente is dead, but the Afghan people will be haunted by its ghost for years to come.

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